

The inception of the New Television Workshop can be most appropriately dated to 1969 with the broadcast of *The Medium Is the Medium*, a compendium of six original works commissioned from invited artists that represented the debut of video art on broadcast TV in the United States.¹ The idea for the program came about by way of the groundbreaking exhibition, then in its planning stages, of 'Television as a Creative Medium', at the Howard Wise Gallery,² and WGBH was selected to produce it.

Perhaps the key reason that the Boston public station had been so chosen was a longstanding commitment to experimentation that established it as an environment open to the unorthodox. This can be largely attributed to Fred Barzyk who, fresh out of college, joined the staff as a producer and director, and soon introduced something of a subversive element within the station. To demonstrate that symphony broadcasts could be accompanied by more provocative visuals, he convinced a number of other WGBH directors to surreptitiously create a series of short pieces collectively entitled *Jazz Images*,³ imaginative interpretations that have been considered some of the first music videos and precursors to video art.⁴ This was in 1961, and that same year Barzyk invited the popular New York radio raconteur Jean Shepherd to travel up to Boston to create a sequence of short works of indeterminate length, *Rear Bumpers*,⁵ that aired after the station's official sign-off time. The post-late night format of *Rear Bumpers* would be used again for later series of video art.

Experimentation of the latter type would not have been possible without the measured support of the WGBH programming and administrative staff, and this is confirmed by the fact that, by the mid-1960s, WGBH was looking to attract a younger audience from among the large college population in the Boston region. They gave Barzyk carte blanche to develop a series especially for this purpose, and he engaged a young British teacher of English at Tufts University, David Silver, as the 'star' of the series *What's Happening Mr. Silver?* There was no fixed format for the program, and it could range from interviews with countercultural figures, thematic shows on violence or new technology, or mock news/variety programs. Some of these were controversial, but none more radical than a live episode entitled *Madness and Intuition*, in which Barzyk adopted John Cage's stochastic methods of music composition for TV production. *Madness and Intuition* garnered a National Educational Television award, a good deal of national press, and an investigation by the US government, which was under the misapprehension that the show might represent a security threat.

A number of well-known video artists produced works at the Workshop over the years. Nam June Paik created many of his earliest tapes, Peter Campus nearly all of his, and William Wegman, Ros Barron and others made a number as well.

Paik became one of the first Rockefeller Foundation artists-in-residence at the station, and it was with this support that he traveled to Japan to collaborate with engineer Shuya Abe on their eponymous video synthesizer. The prototype was then shipped to Boston and installed at WGBH for use by NTW artists, most notably Ron Hays who, probably more than anyone else, came to master this idiosyncratic machine and created the 'Music Image Workshop' program to further explore the creation of visual accompaniment to works of classical music.

By conventional standards of tool development, it was the Paik/Abe Video Synthesizer that provided the New Television Workshop its prominence (and much information about this tool is readily available elsewhere), and it received its premiere broadcast in a live three-hour marathon, *Video Commune – The Beatles From Beginning to End*, in August 1970. The long-format live broadcast also became part of the repertoire of WGBH when, in 1972, Dorothy Chiesa produced and David Atwood directed *The Very First Half-Inch Videotape Festival Ever* over a four-hour block on a Saturday afternoon. The format resembled that of a convention, where all manner of individuals – artists, social activists, psychiatrists and teachers – using the new portapak system were interviewed about and presented excerpts from their works, which were rescanned by studio cameras to make them broadcastable. Chiesa also oversaw the creation of a special facility in nearby Watertown where artists could borrow portapaks and work with editing equipment outside the pressures and expense of the broadcast studio itself. Every attempt was made to air works when possible, but the Workshop also showed a commitment to pure experimentation – and failure.

Another revolutionary programming innovation at the New Television Workshop was the experimental broadcast of double-channel simulcasts between 1968 and 1970, which, to be properly experienced, required the viewer to bring together two TV sets, one tuned to Channel 2 and the other Channel 44, both owned and operated by WGBH. How many people actually viewed these dual-screen presentations as conceived remains an open question, but two particular productions are especially noteworthy. The first is *CITY/Motion/Space/Game*, a complex collaboration from 1968 by producer Rick Hauser with Rockefeller artists-in-residence choreographer/dancer Gus Solomons, Jr., playwright Mary Feldhaus-Weber and composer John Morris. The other – and final – two-channel work was Stan Vanderbeek's 1970 *Violence Sonata*, equally elaborate in its mix of pre-filmed and taped material, live studio scenes with an attendant audience, telephone call-ins, and an overall air of theatricality.

The New Television Workshop was extremely eclectic in its consideration of what, in fact, represented 'new television', and encouraged a Dance Video Program, initiated by Nancy Mason, that brought in prominent choreographers to create new works especially for the television medium – something rare in those days. There was also a focus on the

production of original dramas under the auspices of Fred Barzyk with Olivia Tappan, and these were often coproductions with David Loxton at the Television Laboratory at WNET in New York. And there were a number of regular slots for presentation of artists' video, including 'Artists' Showcase', another end of the evening placement of works of variable length produced by Dorothy Chiesa, and the long-running national series, 'New Television', the creation of Susan Dowling, who also became director of the Workshop when Barzyk decided to concentrate on other projects.

As a result of this diversity of approaches, NTW lasted until 1992 – nearly a quarter-century.

It should be apparent that the variety of innovative forms of presentation of artists' video at WGBH – variable length programs, live broadcasts of long-duration, double-channel transmissions with elements of interactivity, a free-form series aimed at a young audience, and a commitment to small-format, non-broadcast video – was one of its most cogent features and, in this respect, a strong case could be made that Fred Barzyk and those with whom he collaborated considered the station as a singular and expansive instrument – or tool – in and of itself, upon which they could perform, reshaping the airwaves from the rigid presentational modes and seemingly immutable and redundant formulae of conventional broadcast into something more fluid and responsive to artists' needs. Fred's most profound contribution was to make malleable an otherwise rock-solid medium and, in the process of doing so, redefine viewers' conception of what television was capable of. At this, Barzyk, and those who came under his influence, were virtuosos upon the most expensive and influential tool of the twentieth century.

A final show of Barzyk's skills was his ability not only to gain the support of – or grip in his vision – the institutional structure of WGBH, but also to convince it of the lasting worth of the works that were produced at the New Television Workshop. Within the station's new facility that opened in October 2007 is a first-rate preservation archive housing 'in excess of 750,000 assets, 2/3 of which are media items (audio, video, film)',⁶ including Quad originals and outtakes, that incorporates virtually all the productions of the New Television Workshop. Such a vast treasure trove, accessible to scholars, students and others, exists in no other location,⁷ and it is the New Television Workshop's indisputable legacy.

Notes

1. The artists participating in *The Medium is the Medium* were Aldo Tambellini, Thomas Tadlock, Allan Kaprow, James Seawright with Mimi Seawright (Garrard), Otto Piene and Nam June Paik.
2. Records indicate that *The Medium is the Medium* was first aired on March 23, 1969, weeks before the Howard Wise Gallery show actually opened on May 17.
3. Two of the *Jazz Images* shorts are especially memorable: the first a piece in which a toy kaleidoscope was placed in front of the camera lens, pointed at crumpled tin foil on a turntable, and rotated in time to the music. Only the broadcast comedian Ernie Kovacs had, prior to this, undertaken a similar experiment in abstraction to fill a few minutes of the innumerable hours he often was on the air each week. See John Minkowsky (1986), 'An Intimate Vacuum: Ernie Kovacs in the Aura of Video Art', in *The Vision of Ernie*

Kovacs exhibition catalog, New York: The Museum of Broadcasting, p. 38. The second work in the series showed overhead shots of a pair of hands, recorded upside down and vice versa, peeling potatoes, again to the tempo of the music.

4. See 'A Video Chronology, 1959–1974', in Douglas Davis and Alison Simmons (eds) (1977), *The New Television: A Public/Private Art: Essays, Statement and Videotapes Based on 'Open Circuits: An International Conference on the Future of Television'*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, p. 280.
5. Some of the *Rear Bumpers* episodes were straight headshots of Jean Shepherd recounting his famous semi-autobiographical stories, but the majority were ventures in a more experimental vein and created especially for the series. For example: a stage manager is trying to locate Jean for a taping session and finds a room in which there is only an audio tape recorder playing back Shepherd's voice and a large portrait of him mounted on the wall. This piece was shown at a memorial service for Jean, Barzyk has noted, for its poignant evocation of the radio artist in his original milieu.
6. Keith Luf, archivist at WGBH, personal communication, October 3, 2008.
7. For a sampling of the Archive's bounty, visit <http://main.wgbh.org/wgbh/NTW> or <http://openvault.wgbh.org>. Many other productions from the Workshop are also available on request on-site.